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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 HO CHI MINH CITY 001590

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SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PHUM](#) [SOCI](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PREF](#) [KIRF](#) [VM](#) [ETMIN](#) [HUMANR](#) [RELFREE](#)

SUBJECT: CHRISTMAS IN VIETNAM'S CENTRAL HIGHLANDS

REF: A) HANOI 3392 B) HCMC 1587

1. (SBU) Summary: According to contacts in the Catholic and Protestant communities, Christmas services in the Central Highlands provinces of Gia Lai and Kontum were numerous and peaceful, although under heavy police and military scrutiny. In contrast, Protestant services in Dak Lak province were sharply limited. Our contacts echoed the GVN's allegation that some Montagnards in the U.S. were attempting to organize Christmas protests and a mass cross-border migration to Cambodia. With few exceptions, Christmas celebrations were conducted freely elsewhere in Southern and Central Vietnam. End summary.

2. (SBU) On December 24, the GVN notified Embassy and ConGen of a "Montagnard Foundation plot" to cause unrest in the Central Highlands over Christmas and said it would deal severely with perpetrators (refuels). ConGen has been in ongoing contact with Catholic leaders, the GVN-recognized Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV) and unrecognized Protestant House church leaders. They told us that there was a heavier than usual police and military presence throughout the Central Highlands. In Gia Lai Province, one contact estimated that approximately 100 Montagnards were detained. Most were released after police questioning, although a few may still be in custody. Our contacts heard reports of sporadic border crossings into Cambodia, but could not confirm any incidents.

3. (SBU) Despite the tension over possible unrest, Protestant and Catholic contacts in Gia Lai and Kontum told us that their congregations observed Christmas without police harassment or interference. The Kontum Catholic diocese (which covers Gia Lai and Kontum) said its Christmas celebrations this year were "magnificent." Diocesan officials noted that they secured permission from provincial authorities to hold additional services at fourteen temporary locations (4 in Kontum, 10 in Gia Lai) to meet demand.

4. (SBU) In Gia Lai, the GVN-recognized Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV) held services for over 75,000 -- mostly Montagnard -- followers. Our SECV contact told us that SECV Christmas services were held at 16 recognized churches and another 440 "meeting points." He added that the provincial government will recognize a 17th SECV church in the province on December 30. Other contacts told us that unrecognized house churches in Kontum and Gia Lai also were able to hold Christmas services without incident.

5. (SBU) In Dak Lak Province, Catholic services were unimpeded. Local officials permitted Protestant services only at the four recognized SECV churches. Police were widely deployed in Montagnard-majority villages and prevented other Protestant worshippers from congregating. One source added that the phone lines of many house church pastors in Dak Lak were cut. A second house church leader text messaged us that in the days before Christmas there were signs of impending unrest in a number of Montagnard villages. As a result, he texted, local authorities "blocked the church from organizing Christmas" there.

Was there a Montagnard Foundation "plot"?

6. (SBU) Protestant community contacts said that the "Montagnard Foundation" was involved in organizing unrest and a mass cross-border migration of ethnic minorities. One of our contacts, who helps establish house churches in Dak Lak, said that the Montagnard Foundation encouraged Dak Lak Montagnards to flee to Cambodia, promising resettlement in the United States. Another contact told us that in Gia Lai, former members of FULRO and other "Dega" separatists were attempting to organize Christmastime protests but were detained by police. (Note: FULRO is the acronym for the insurgency that operated in the Central Highlands until 1992 and sought to create an independent Montagnard state. End Note.) Our Gia Lai contact explained that the Montagnard Foundation is capitalizing on the frustration and alienation of the ethnic minority community in the Highlands.

Services normal elsewhere in the South and Center

7. (SBU) Catholic officials said that services were packed throughout southern and central Vietnam with no reported incidents. Protestant house church leaders told us that, barring a handful of exceptions, they heard of no reports of serious police harassment of the thousands of house church Christmas

services in southern and central Vietnam.

Comment

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18. (SBU) The clampdown on ethnic minority Protestants in Dak Lak is not unexpected in light of the GVN's indications of planned unrest. (More surprising is its sharing this information with us in advance.) We also note that none of our religious contacts in the region contradicted GVN allegations of impending trouble or of Montagnard Foundation involvement. Provincial officials in Gia Lai and Kontum demonstrated considerable confidence in allowing unimpeded Christmas celebrations in the face of possible unrest. In Gia Lai, the Protestant Community has firewalled itself from the "Dega" movement and established a working relationship with provincial officials. In contrast, Dak Lak's provincial government remains the most hardline compared to other Central Highlands provinces and there is little constructive dialogue between officials and Protestant leaders to ease tension.

WINNICK